

NICOLAE IORGA – ITALIAN DESTINATIONS: VENICE*

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Born into the family of a lawyer, at Botoșani, a little town in northern Romania, in 1871, Nicolae Iorga held “Voltaire’s position” in early twentieth-century Romanian culture, as suggested by George Călinescu,¹ writer and literary critic. During his fifty-year career, tragically brought to an end by the Iron Guard’s² commandos in 1940, Nicolae Iorga, a genuine encyclopedic spirit, was a historian, memoirs writer, literary critic, playwright and poet, but also a university professor, academician and an important political man.

As a young boy he liked traveling, and a holiday in Roman or around Vaslui, places near his native town, was for him “a long ramble in wonderful worlds.” Victor Hugo’s³ *Orientales* and Mihail Kogălniceanu’s⁴ *Chronicles* were his favorite books in his childhood, not so much for the tales contained in the French poems or the old Moldavian chronicles, but rather for their power to transport him under new heavens, as Nicolae Iorga confessed in the preface to his volume *On Faraway Roads*,⁵ published in 1904. He thought that “travel is a need of the soul”; everyone likes “changing places, meeting new people, so that on coming back, they may cherish even more the ordinary places and people they live with.”⁶

Referring to the delicate French writer Xavier de Maistre,⁷ who published a jocular *trip around his room*,⁸ Nicolae Iorga’s opinion is that a journey does not necessarily mean covering a long way, crossing swords with the world, sailing across the oceans, and leaving your imprints in as many diverse, unknown places as possible, as even in your immediate neighborhood “there is always something

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¹ George Călinescu (1899-1965), Romanian literary critic and historian, prose writer.

² Nicolae Iorga was assassinated in November 1940 by Iron Guard legionaries who considered him responsible for the murder of their commander, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, during King Carol II’s dictatorship. At the news of Iorga’s death, 47 universities and academies throughout the world had their flags fly at half-mast.

³ Victor Hugo (1802-1885), French poet, playwright, novelist and prose writer.

⁴ Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891), Romanian politician, journalist and writer.

⁵ Nicolae Iorga, *Pe drumuri depărtate (note de călătorie)*, București, 1904.

⁶ *Cum să călătorim*, essay published by Nicolae Iorga in vol. *Sfaturi pe întuneric. Conferințe la radio*, București, 1936, pp. 329-334.

⁷ Xavier de Maistre (1763-1852), French military man and man of letters.

⁸ Xavier de Maistre, *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, Paris, 1864.

worth picking up which should not be despised.”⁹ The important thing is that the traveler should have an observant eye for each thing, person or situation, because anything that does not resemble what they have at home can be useful one day.

The teenager’s and, later, the scholar’s itineraries showed his need to communicate, the learned man’s vivid spirit, whose travel books succeeded in shaping a complex image of Europe and of other parts of the world which he had visited to study, to do research in great libraries, deliver lectures and conferences, or participate in history meetings and congresses, thus carrying Romanian cultural values to foreign lands.

Considering travel a fresh form of knowledge, Nicolae Iorga was never interested in races, exotic destinations or anything that might reduce travel to mere selfish entertainment, the more so as his journeys were often modestly supported.

The preface to *On Faraway Roads*, an autobiographical witness and profession of faith, reveals the main aim of his journeys: insights into people’s lives and the beauty immortalized in works and monuments of art created by their predecessors. Wherever he might have been in the world at some time, from the gates of the East to the United States’ cities, Iorga compared at every turn what had stuck in his mind from his readings with the reality he was discovering at first hand during his roaming through the world. When he returned to places visited before, he was interested to see the changes made in rural and urban landscapes, in people’s behavior and outlooks, because the image of people’s everyday life was continuously present in his travel books, which, along with his pamphlets or memoirs, rank Nicolae Iorga among the masters of Romanian literature.

The last decade of the nineteenth century was Nicolae Iorga’s richest period in travel projects, but only trips to Italy and a few later ones were materialized in travelogues, published in periodicals, and later republished in the volumes *Impressions from Italy* (1895) and *On Faraway Roads* (1904).

Nicolae Iorga wandered through Italy for the first time in 1890, when he was not yet twenty, and the outcome was *Impressions from Italy*,¹⁰ which, although it contains regrettable things, as the author himself said, is interesting because it reflects “the thoughts of a Romanian youth born in Botoșani, educated in Iași, baptized in Bucharest’s waters and who, without any plan, set off to conquer Italy. This enterprise would have required another age, different training and other mental attitudes, and as for conveying impressions, other intellectual skills, in addition to a depth and refinement of feeling without which one would commit a sin if they wrote a couple of lines about Italy.”¹¹

⁹ Nicolae Iorga, *Cum să călătorim*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by Valeriu Râpeanu, 3 vols., București, 1987, vol. III, p. 523.

¹⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Amintiri din Italia*, București, 1895.

¹¹ Idem, *Primele mele drumuri italiene, conferință ținută la cercul d-lui profesor Al. Marcu (27 martie 1936)*, București, 1936, p. 6.

For Nicolae Iorga, Italy was the country whose past, art and literature are worth getting to know, about which one should read much, wisely, patiently and methodically, before embarking on a journey, avoiding the guide book though. It is the country in which one should avoid the hotels and would rather live in people's houses, which he always found friendly and unforgettable. The most important thing was the contact with Italian daily life, which Iorga did not find difficult because the Italians are easy-going and hospitable and, unlike the French, they do not demand years of proof before making friends with you, so that you may not get old before winning their hearts as you have wished from the very beginning.¹²

In Nicolae Iorga's opinion, once returned from Italy, you should not proceed with your recollections in haste; at home, you should take your experience and compare it with that of another, and if you really think that you can say something original, say it. "Literature means saying things that nobody else has said and which can be useful to some."¹³

Nicolae Iorga would return to Italy time and time again to do research in archives and libraries, to deliver lectures in universities, to participate in history congresses or just to travel. He crossed it from north to south,¹⁴ passing through Venice, Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Pisa, Rome, Florence, and Naples, but the recurrent city in his Italian wanderings was certainly Venice, which inspired the scholar's pen and produced exquisite artistic pages, comparable to those written by Marcel Proust.¹⁵

At first, "the doges' city" did not fascinate young Iorga, who thought it was a gloomy, "isolated market town" through which gondolas were gliding like "mourning coffins with a shadow at the helm." Most inhabitants seemed mere parasites living upon its past glory, trying to get as much as possible and sometimes by fraud from tourists.

The nineteen-year old youth noticed the great number of churches one can visit for weeks on end, the humblest one hiding art treasures which elsewhere would have been the pride of the place and which in Venice go unnoticed: Santa Maria della Salute, built for Madonna to drive away the plague ravaging the land in 1630, San Roco, San Sebastiano, the burial place of Veronese,¹⁶ San Georgio Maggiore, whose façade was designed by Palladio¹⁷ and Scamozzi,¹⁸ Santa Maria

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Daniela Bușă, "A călători e o nevoie sufletească" – impresii din peregrinările prin Italia, in vol. *Călători români în Occident*, ed. by Nicolae Bocșan, Ioan Bolovan, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 77.

¹⁵ Marcel Proust (1871-1922), French essayist and novelist.

¹⁶ Paolo Caliari, also called Veronese (1528-1588), Italian painter during Late Renaissance.

¹⁷ Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), Italian architect.

¹⁸ Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548-1616), Venetian architect.

Gloriosa dei Frari, where Tizian¹⁹ and Canova²⁰ were buried, or San Giorgio dei Greci, the Orthodox church which reminded Nicolae Iorga of the church Trei Ierarhi²¹ of Iași.²²

The poor people in Venice struck Iorga as preserving the old doges' facial expression, with their hooked noses and suspicious, arrogant eyes, while the young florists seemed as if descending from Tintoretto's²³ or Veronese's paintings.

A graphical description is that of San Marco Place gleaming in the morning sun with the towering Doges' Palace and San Marco Cathedral. For young Iorga everything looked as if coming out of *A Thousand and One Nights* because the "Venetians' noble pride was based on one and only taste and worship: wealth. And indeed, rich they were, displaying exceptional, incredible opulence, which allowed them to turn their city into a forest of statues, actually a borderless palace."²⁴

At that time, Salla dello scrutinio in the Doges' Palace, crammed with historical paintings, exasperated him, his eyes getting "tired of ceaselessly stopping before the same round, red-cheeked, idealized figures" painted by masters such as Veronese, Tintoretto or Bassano.²⁵ During this first encounter with Venice, Iorga chose to admire works at Academia delle Arti belonging to Flemish painters Cornelis de Wael,²⁶ Ruysdael,²⁷ Van Dyck,²⁸ and Teniers²⁹: "well, Wael, a second-rate painter, far from having the talent of Paolo Caliari or Jacopo Tintoretto, could keep me for days on end before his little canvases on which, led by his own tastes beyond any artistic school, he made an unobtrusive depiction of uneventful, everyday life."³⁰

¹⁹ Tiziano Vecelli (1488/1490-1576), main representative of the Venetian painting school of the Renaissance.

²⁰ Antonio Canova (1757-1822), Italian sculptor.

²¹ Trei Ierarhi, church located in Iași, Northern Romania, built in 1637-1639.

²² Nicolae Iorga, *Amintiri din Italia*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by V. Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 23.

²³ Jacopo Comin, also called Tintoretto (1518-1594), one of the greatest painters of the Venetian School.

²⁴ Nicolae Iorga, *Amintiri din Italia*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by Valeriu Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 23.

²⁵ Jacopo Da Ponte Bassano (1515-1592), Venetian painter who found inspiration mostly in rural scenery.

²⁶ Cornelis de Wael (1592-1667), Flemish painter, engraver, art dealer.

²⁷ Jacob van Ruysdael (1629-1682), Dutch landscape painter.

²⁸ Antoon van Dyck (1599-1641), Flemish painter and engraver, representative of the Baroque style.

²⁹ David Teniers (1610-1690), Flemish painter, representative of the Baroque style, he painted mainly rural scenes.

³⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Amintiri din Italia*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by Valeriu Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 27.

Iorga considered that religious and historical paintings, although masterpieces, were legion and monotonous, with landscape almost absent or simplified. He only praised Giambattista Tiepolo's³¹ painting, discovered at Academia delle Arti, as lively and realistic because Christ did not have the usual serene face with no imprint of anguish, but that of an ordinary man with feelings and sorrows: "hollow eyes, painful mouth, contorted face, the body crushed under the burden of the cross; then, the highwaymen, in rags, with the dread of death on their faces, bearing the horror and dark dampness of the jail; one of them in particular looks as if he were trembling on the canvas: panic-stricken, closed eyes, big bearded face, cowering body. It is the apotheosis of human pain. It is the work of a master, because the painter was capable of intense feeling and that was transferred to the canvas. That is why I admire Tiepolo's painting."³²

The young traveler Nicolae Iorga was impressed not only by the "seen things" in the Doges' Palace but also by what was hidden behind them. He evoked the assembly of the senators presided by the Doge, the decisions taken in the Assembly Hall, the place where they were planning the future conquest of the Adriatic coasts, the Corfu Isle or the Crete, all of them fallen under the flag of the Venetian Republic. Other cold, dark halls such as the Council of the Ten or the Room of the Three, had witnessed the passing of sentences, of final judgments, which set the hangman's hand in motion or threw the trouble makers into jail for the rest of their lives. Descending into such a jail of political prisoners, Iorga thought that "the world has ceased to exist in these places of torment and tears; everything seems far, far away, like a dream of light and life. The brick cell has damp walls from the water dripping down and a pile of stones in a corner as a bed. The iron door is black, exactly like this hell of darkness."³³

In spite of its bloody history, Venice remained the place to which Nicolae Iorga would return, each time discovering something new. His Venetian visit described in the volume *On Faraway Roads*³⁴ offers a glimpse of the city's everyday life. Campiello del Vin, a small place, animated during the day with the bustle around the old fountain, invites the rich and the poor alike to spend their evening in its pubs, in a true spirit of fraternity, because "Italian life does not know the Chinese division into classes ... There is always somebody who is singing or playing the harmonium, the national instrument, or the ocarina; this is a country where one can hear beautiful singing even among porters. And after midnight they start Homeric

³¹ Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770), Baroque painter, father of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo and Lorenzo Tiepolo, painters.

³² Nicolae Iorga, *Amintiri din Italia*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by Valeriu Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 29.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

³⁴ Nicolae Iorga, *Pe drumuri depărtate (note de călătorie)*.

battles, sometimes with one too many knives, in a country where blood is quick, life dirt cheap and the supreme gratification, noise and amusement.”³⁵

Iorga achieved fresco-like force when he recounted an evening in *Signora Bruna*’s pension, in whose atrium her tenants used to gather without any rank distinction in order to enjoy their coffee, to do sewing, to sing or to read the newspaper.

The old beggar, out in the street every night, singing the tune *Povera figlia*, often humiliated by the people opening the windows either to throw a penny or to splash water onto him, is contrasted with the nice pair of children who are rewarded with a rain of *soldini* (little coins) for their serenade.

There is much truth in Iorga’s statement that “one does not know Venice if they have not got lost in it. You are walking along the marble bank of the canal and suddenly it disappears, leaving only the palace within sight, reflecting itself in the murky, greenish water ... You are following the noisy, motley, fenced street smelling of broiled fish and rotten vegetables, of fresh polenta and yellow and white cheese – and unexpectedly you find yourself before a wall over which a couple of sad, timeless, old cypresses are hanging majestically. You turn right or left through the maize of lanes and cobbled paths, and you come upon an unknown place which eventually proves to be a familiar place seen from another angle. You are heading for a tower which seems close by, but it vanishes from sight just when you are at its feet.”³⁶

Although the little streets seem frightening especially at night, when darkness is closing in, shops are shut and people gather in market places, criminality is low, reduced to the theft of an unaccompanied lady’s handbag; people are “unexpectedly kind: they do not inconvenience you by curiosity, they will answer your questions promptly and willingly give you directions.”³⁷

Following Nicolae Iorga’s participation in the Congress of Byzantine Studies of 1936, he published his travel notes under the title *Insights into Italy*³⁸ in “Revista Fundațiilor Regale,” in which he suggested that in order to understand Venice properly you should first visit Torcello. This island close to Venice, with a population of a few hundred of vegetable and wine growers, fishermen or boatmen, hides an eleventh/twelfth-century cathedral which contains in its central apse features of the life of the seventh-century church, dating from the time of the island’s first inhabitants. Iorga was deeply impressed by the gleaming mosaic of the cathedral. The Last Judgment is “a unique display of iconography. The story is ordered according to a lost plan or to the vision of a fresh mind, capable of

³⁵ Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by V. Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 144.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Idem, *Viziuni de Italie*, in “Revista Fundațiilor Regale,” IV, 1 January 1937, no. 1, pp. 3-20.

continuous creative thinking. Jesus Christ, the great and last judge, is surrounded by everything that populates the *Old* and *New Testaments*: plump, clumsy angels with round-square, serene and almost smiling faces, naked bodies awaiting the eternal expiating whip, skulls at the very base of this multi-register display, a realistic Saint Peter who, kneeling, fulfils his own role in this tragedy of the souls summoned to the great sifting out. Each figure, each attitude is worth a thorough examination: all of them add something new to the history of typology, which is so important in art history.³⁹ It is here, in this basilica, that Nicolae Iorga discovered “the face of the most extraordinary figure of Virgin Mary” floating upon the whole expanse of the ceiling.

The same trip produced the detailed description of the eighteenth-century Venetian museum of Ca' Rezzonico,⁴⁰ the palace built by Baltassare Longhena⁴¹ and extended by architect Giorgio Massari⁴² before its public opening in 1936. Nicolae Iorga was fascinated by Giambattista Tiepolo's and his son's, Giandomenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) frescos, by the paintings of the Venetian master Pietro Longhi,⁴³ whom Iorga considered to be for fine arts what Carlo Goldoni⁴⁴ was for drama: “Longhi and Goldoni are of a kind; each seems made for the other, they complete each other. The humorous poet cannot have better illustrations than those of this jester of the brush. We only make a virtue of necessity when we say this.”⁴⁵

Watching the art pieces in the museum, Nicolae Iorga noticed the resemblance between the human type patterns of the past and those of his time: “The same types have been handed down from one generation to another: doges and proveditors, ship captains, generals, soldiers, all march past our eyes. When the character is a monk or a nun, you cannot see any difference in their outfit. The wall, the canvas or the marble display figures seen in the street or the people you come across outside seem descended from paintings, perfect animations of medallions and statues.”⁴⁶

Nicolae Iorga finds paradoxical that Venetian art lacks love for children, so often present, for example, in Murillo's⁴⁷ paintings, although children are the city's

³⁹ Idem, *Viziuni de Italie*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by Valeriu Râpeanu, vol. III, p. 444.

⁴⁰ Ca' Rezzonico Gallery, situated in the Gothic Contarini Palace on the Great Canal housing an interesting collection of painting, old furniture and contemporary art.

⁴¹ Baldassare Longhena (1598-1682), architect, one of the most important representatives of Baroque architecture who worked mostly in Venice.

⁴² Giorgio Massari (1687-1766), architect, representative of Venetian Late Baroque.

⁴³ Pietro Longhini (1701-1785), Venetian painter.

⁴⁴ Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793), Venetian playwright and librettist.

⁴⁵ Nicolae Iorga, *Viziuni de Italie*, p. 445.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 447.

⁴⁷ Bartolomé Estebán Murillo (1617-1682), Spanish painter, important representative of Baroque painting.

real masters, with their cries, gymnasts' performances on the railings of the canals, with their songs and noisy packs.

Insights into Italy also describes how people were spending their Sunday morning, when the centre used to be invaded by the Venetians. Nicolae Iorga considers that it is only on Sunday that one can gain a clear perception of what Venice's working people are like. The low classes do not generally go anywhere because the old city's restaurants are scarce, cafes of Austrian origin attract only businessmen, and the theatres are few and expensive. There is instead the pleasure to stroll unhurriedly in the street, which "is an act in itself and not a means to reach a destination. This accounts for their wave-like gait. Even the least perceptive foreigner becomes aware of this rhythm, as well as of the cheerful nature of this nation, made manifest in their radiant smile and friendly look, which added to female beauty, in abundance here, reveals a proud icon of the individual who works in order to live and not to accumulate riches, and who does not curse those who happen to have more than themselves. A sort of honest contentment passes from one person to another, adding a further, even more blessed ray to the sunlight."⁴⁸

But one does not come across only handsome faces in the streets of Venice. The successive marriages within the same family, dampness from canals, squalor, all have given birth to crippled, humpbacked, short-legged or blind people. In Venice nobody laughs at these infirmities, children do not make fun of those whom fate was less generous with, that is why these people do not hide themselves, "a feeling of Christian brotherhood embraces them, too. As the underprivileged do not seem embarrassed, they do not destroy the impression of the whole, which is of normality and power."⁴⁹

Looking out for some old chalcographies, Iorga went into Venice's old Jewish district, the ghetto whose gates had been locked up once and which at the time looked in decline. It is a poor outlying district because "the centre has taken all," and the shops have nothing to offer. The rich and the clever have left it, and foreigners do not visit it any longer. The people left behind offer you everything they have, inviting you to visit their synagogue, impressing you with their patriotism, because "nowhere else Jewry has remained more faithful to its origins and rights," Nicolae Iorga remarked.

Nicolae Iorga's connections to the Italian cultural circles led to his appointment as organizer of the Romanian pavilion at the 1938 Venice Biennial Exhibition. This was his last trip to Venice. As President of the Cultural League, Nicolae Iorga succeeded in receiving the funds necessary for the construction of the Romanian pavilion, one of the most beautiful, in close proximity to that of Italy. The pavilion was erected under the guidance of his son, Valentin-Nicolae

⁴⁸ Nicolae Iorga, *Viziuni de Italie*, p. 448.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

Iorga⁵⁰ and his son-in-law, Alessandro Valota,⁵¹ and the participating Romanian artists, four painters (Gheorghe Petrașcu,⁵² Ștefan Popescu,⁵³ Ion Teodorescu Sion,⁵⁴ Eustațiu Stoenescu⁵⁵), and three sculptors (Oscar Han,⁵⁶ Corneliu Medrea,⁵⁷ Ion Jalea⁵⁸) had been selected by Nicolae Iorga in accordance with *the age of the art* and not *that of its authors*.⁵⁹ Nicolae Iorga is also the author of a catalogue introducing the Romanian collection displayed within the exhibition.⁶⁰

During his 1938 journey, Nicolae Iorga provided a few glimpses of Venice's everyday life, published under the title of *Glimpses of Venice*,⁶¹ consisting of twelve literary pieces, each depicting a particular aspect of the city.

"Venice belongs to the children," says Nicolae Iorga in *Children* "They are everywhere, from the babies held in arms, carried in linen baskets held by six hands, driven in prams along curving narrow streets – little men like artistic figures molded by great masters – to the dolls seriously chatting about all-important questions in squares, on the steps of old churches or by the end of the canal, to which they are going down like water creatures, performing complicated gymnasts' figures on the iron railings, and finally to the less than ten-year old heroic wrestlers, who scramble the statues and sit down on the head of no matter what personage, or who start fighting, anticipating the heroic deeds of the future."⁶²

A funnily described scene is that in which the children assembled in the square are sharing a few sweets, thrown from his room window by Nicolae Iorga

⁵⁰ Valentin-Nicolae Iorga (1912-1977), architect, senior lecturer, Nicolae Iorga's sixth child from his marriage to Ecaterina Bogdan.

⁵¹ Alessandro Valota, Italian engineer, married to Magdalena, Nicolae Iorga's third daughter from the same marriage.

⁵² Gheorghe Petrașcu (1872-1949), Romanian painter, famous for his landscapes painted in Italy (Venice, Chioggia, Naples). He participated in the Biennial Exhibition in Venice in 1924, 1936, 1938.

⁵³ Ștefan Popescu (1872-1948), Romanian painter, honorary member of the Romanian Academy.

⁵⁴ Ion Teodorescu-Sion (1882-1939), Romanian painter.

⁵⁵ Eustațiu Stoenescu (1884-1957), Romanian portrait painter.

⁵⁶ Oscar Han (1891-1976), Romanian author, monograph writer and sculptor.

⁵⁷ Corneliu Medrea (1888-1964), Romanian sculptor, professor of sculpture, associate member of the Romanian Academy.

⁵⁸ Ion Jalea (1887-1983), Romanian sculptor, member of the Romanian Academy.

⁵⁹ Nicolae Iorga, *România la Expoziția de la Veneția*, in vol. *Sfaturi pe întuneric. Conferințe la radio II*, București, 1936, p. 273.

⁶⁰ Idem, *La Romania alla Biennale di Venezia – 1938*, text in Italian pp. III-VI and in French pp. VII-XII.

⁶¹ Idem, *Instantanee venețiene*, in "Revista Fundațiilor Regale," V, 1 September 1938, no. 9, pp. 483-493.

⁶² Idem, *Instantanee venețiene*, in Idem, *Călătorii peste hotare*, ed. by Lucian Cursaru, București, 1980, p. 33.

himself. As soon as they learn that there is a sick lady in the building, the children stop making noise and go to a neighboring square. “Besides the well-developed social sense, these wonderful kids, one cuter and nimbler than the other, also possess an ethic sense. This is the way in which people are training for life,”⁶³ concludes Nicolae Iorga.

*People and Entertainment*⁶⁴ sketches out the Sunday of those who have worked hard the rest of the week, people with bent backs, choked lungs, eyes burnt from the chemicals used in manufacturing pearls of all colors and sizes. At the same time, Nicolae Iorga so beautifully puts it when he writes that every girl is wearing “the dress that fits her best,” in order to enjoy a stroll during which she meets “rich costumes and the eyes of the handsomest boys ... There are few places in the world where one can come across so many beautiful women from the lowest layers as in mysterious Venice.”⁶⁵

Unlike the rest of Italy, Venice is still dominated by the East, by Byzantium, once a master here, meaning that people mix up in the street, but at home, they hide behind closed doors, isolating themselves and becoming indifferent to their neighbors, as Iorga points out in *Mixing Up and Isolation*,⁶⁶ another Venetian aspect.

The *Former Gondolier*⁶⁷ is not the equivalent of a simple cab driver, interested only in horses and money, he is rather an artist, and even a friend of those he steers along the canals of Venice. Such a man is Chiozza Valeriano, the Gondolier No. 10 of the Danieli Hotel, a connoisseur of the life and politics of his time. The conversation with him is full of the wisdom characteristic of the Italian people, but especially of the Venetians, whose veins, more often than not, pump noble blood.

*Church Fetes*⁶⁸ wake up the city in a chime of bells, but at the time, perhaps under the threat of war, they had a “stale smell,” unable to summon up thousands of people like before. Seldom can you see a tourist taking pictures, the English do not take part, while the Germans, in groups of young workers, seem uninterested. There is no longer the old atmosphere; “all that Venetian society dressed up exactly like the characters in old master Carpaccio’s⁶⁹ paintings and feeling consonantly with the singers”⁷⁰ has disappeared.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 39

⁶⁹ Vittore Carpaccio (1460-1525), Venetian painter.

⁷⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Instantanee venețiene*, p. 40.

Little poems of pure love take place *in the shade of Saint Mark*,⁷¹ in this walled city where everything is public, where “the community and not the individual decide ..., where the rich man does not look down on the poor man, and the poor man looks at the rich man without envy.”

Venice's Cats are innumerable. They had come to Byzantium as sacred animals, for a long period forbidden to go to pagan lands from “the archaic Egypt of beast-gods or god-beasts.” They were finally adopted by the old city, too. Most of them are on sentry duty, guarding the endless passages and the abandoned cellars of poor quarters, crawling hungrily through holes. They are discreet and silent, “they do not meow or beg. Their initial divinity calls for solemn dignity to their misery ... Take that cat, for example, with soot in her white fur, has remained stone-still in anguish on a marble edge. The gondoliers know her and explain to you: she has withdrawn there to die. With half-closed eyes, she is warming up in the last sunray. In her animal dumbness, without abstract ideas and religious illusions, she is dying as we do, in the same deep and wretchedly painful humility.”⁷²

Over the years, having gained greater familiarity with Venice and having integrated himself into the everyday life of the city and of its inhabitants, this place came to hold a special dimension in Iorga's vision.

In one of the five lectures on Venice commissioned by Casa Școalelor,⁷³ Nicolae Iorga delivered in 1914 under the title *What Venice's Beauty Consists In*, he states that Venice is not only a beautiful town but also one of a kind, unlike any other beautiful city of the world. Venice seems frozen in time, the only place, for example, where one can find after years the same second-hand bookshop with piles of books lying chaotically and the same old now, antiquarian bookseller of the medieval type. He is not at all like the German one, who has all the books filed and priced, but in whose shop you do not expect to make discoveries. It is only in such a bookshop that you can dig up a 1780 guide of Venice, unique by the simplicity with which you are directed through the most hidden quarters of the city as well as through the closing catalogue of paintings and painters' lives. Avoiding “sentences borrowed from aesthetes, the latter is a simple, almost pious introduction to that state of mind one has to get into if they want to breathe in the air of a painting, which was born from the artist's sincere heart and not programmed or determined by abstract principles like ours ...”⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁷³ Idem, *Cinci conferințe despre Veneția, ținute din însărcinarea Casei Școalelor*, București, 1914. A second edition of the work was published by Datina Românească at Valenii de Munte in 1926.

⁷⁴ Idem, *În ce stă frumusețea Veneției*, in Idem, *Pe drumuri depărtate*, ed. by V. Râpeanu, vol. I, p. 570.

Nicolae Iorga tries to explain that this sense of uniqueness is present not only in earlier or more recent travelers' accounts, but also among Venice-born people. Whenever Carlo Goldoni, the famous writer of comedies, returned to his native town after wandering through the world, he continued to be impressed, discovering new, unique marvels, while normally he should have remained untouched by anything except his family.

In Iorga's opinion, the charm of Venice is given above all by the Sea, so different from the sea in other coast places. The sea here is everywhere, it is together with you, it is going away from you; it is looking for you, it is waiting for you; it does not scare you and it does not amaze you, it is at hand; it speaks to you, sometimes in a whisper, indistinctly, but so clearly all the same. It plays tricky, graceful games with you, now spreading out, now hiding itself, only to bewitch you again and again. The charm of the continuous companionship of the changing waters is one of the special secrets of Venice's beauty as far as nature is concerned ...⁷⁵

Venice's is no ordinary sea, it is "a tamed sea," giving life to its owner, purifying, rejuvenating and continuously embellishing it. It is a sea "which knocks at all the gates and touches all the walls, for there is no house without direct communication with it."⁷⁶ Its calm or agitated waters and the rising fog which envelops the old buildings create a sense of familiarity and friendship, a true connection between human soul and nature, giving an unforgettable impression that will haunt you years after you have left the city.

In Nicolae Iorga's opinion, Venice's unique beauty is also given by the buildings themselves, which have frozen in time. In all the other cities of the world people were building massively, after having knocked down in a frenzy all that was left from the old "admirably-proportioned houses." It was only common sense and courage that could have determined town planners to leave among the new constructions "the modest, well-planned dwelling, a feast for the eye, likely to make you feel at home as soon as you pass its threshold."⁷⁷ These demolitions were accounted for by the fact that earlier generations had been poorer than Iorga's contemporaries, who were now raising new towns out of humble villages, thanks to the discovery of new resources, and the advancement in industry and means of communications.

On the other hand, at the time of Nicolae Iorga's visits, the inhabitants of Venice, once a very rich city, were poorer than their predecessors. That is why they did not have to knock down their houses to replace them with new ones: "today's laborer, earning his daily bread in factories with foreign capital, and today's merchant, taking his profit from sales to foreigners, generally called 'foreign

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 572.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 577.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 575.

industry' and Venice's main income resource, did not have the financial power to rebuild their city. Then there was the Venetians' innate attachment to their city that added to the unchanged state of its houses."⁷⁸

Venice's past can be seen not only in certain streets or in museums, as in many other towns, *Venice is the past itself*. Of course there are plenty of museums, public or private art galleries, but Nicolae Iorga thinks that any piece of art has been created for a particular place, in order to produce a particular impression. To take it out of the ensemble means to deprive it of the power it may have on the viewer's soul. He believes that the place where one can watch the Venetian paintings and sculptures in their natural background is the church, be it big or small, where "Madonnas, by their beauty, will tell you that the pain of the earth and the power of heaven are connected, the saints will confess that they have gone through extreme agony for you, the knights in armor will assure you that you can be in afterlife as you once were, because, like Homer's heroes, they themselves follow there the battles their lives were woven of."⁷⁹

Nicolae Iorga sees Venice as a place where not only "the artistic life of the past but also present-day life is everywhere." Its narrow streets are as they were when trodden by Stephen the Great's⁸⁰ Moldavian messengers, by the Romanian Prince Petru Cercel,⁸¹ as well as by other Romanians, daughters and sons-in-law of exiled princes, bishops, monks. The atmosphere everywhere, in palaces as well as in poor houses, is one of democratic brotherhood, difficult to find elsewhere, the atrium welcoming the rich and the poor, noblemen and servants, hosts and guests, men and women.

Nicolae Iorga also points out another feature which contributes to Venice's beauty: communal life, which has also remained unchanged with regard to speech, habits, forms of social life. To Nicolae Iorga's regret, something has been lost: life around fountains, the villagers' meeting point and travelers' refreshment stop. Venice's fountains, genuine art monuments in palace gardens or squares, were places where women and young girls used to come to fill up their beautiful, gleaming, metal or red bronze pails, which they put gracefully on their heads to climb up the steps of bridges like "empresses walking up the steps of the altar to receive the wreaths on their foreheads."⁸² With the fountains out of the landscape, there are no longer jokes to tell, entanglements to make up, engagements to announce and marriages to put an end to, or murders to plan in the dead of night.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 576.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 579.

⁸⁰ Stephen the Great (1433-1504), Moldavia's ruler from 1457 to 1504.

⁸¹ Petru Cercel, Prince of Wallachia between 1583 and 1585.

⁸² N. Iorga, *În ce stă frumusețea Veneției*, p. 585.

Coming again and again to Venice, Nicolae Iorga will be invariably fascinated by the unique beauty of this city derived from the happy combination of the sea, its past and communal life.

In libraries and archives, Venice stores a great deal of information, some of which unpublished yet, about the Romanians. Like other scholars of the time, Nicolae Iorga discovered that treasure and decided to use the several years budget of the Institute for Southeastern European Studies as well as money from generous donations to purchase Palazzo Correr in order to turn it into a “house” of Romanian culture, research and permanent values for the sake of young, talented Romanians, who could carry “a bit of Venice” to Romania.

“Casa Romena” or “Casa Iorga,” officially named the Romanian Institute of Humanistic Research, is housed in the palace built around 1500 and owned by the Corrers, old patricians, who gave the Republic several high dignitaries and the world Pope Gregory XII (1406-1415) in times of trouble for the Catholic Church.

Nicolae Iorga bought the building, apartment by apartment, between 1928 and 1930 from minor landowners compelled to sell, refurbishing it as students’ rooms, study rooms, a private apartment, halls for receptions, conferences and concerts.

Opened in 1930, abandoned for a while and reopened after renovation in 1992, “Casa Romena,” the Romanian Cultural Centre, housed by the beautiful Renaissance-style Correr Palace on the main road between Santa Lucia Railway Station and San Marco Palace, welcomes at all times any guest, be they researchers or simple tourists.

For Nicolae Iorga, traveling represented another direct means of enriching his spiritual world, different from library and archive study. His journeys were also a means to meet personalities of scientific, cultural and political life.

Venice was the city that appealed to Nicolae Iorga’s mind and heart alike, the city he felt most intimately attached to emotionally. His talent of prose writer found a permanent source of inspiration in Venice, his writing gaining a true poetic vibration.

His early impressions were little by little replaced by those of the mature traveler, capable of understanding the mystery and fascination of this city at a time when Thomas Mann⁸³ was shaping Venice as the image of the slowly but steadily approaching death. Nicolae Iorga however always saw Venice as a city of “huge, perfect, mysterious silence, a silence called for by the soul to draw new powers to struggle.”

⁸³ Thomas Mann (1875-1955), German novelist and essayist, 1929 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature for the novel *Buddenbrooks – Verfall einer Familie*.